

The City as a Learning Platform.

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Background

Guadua Activa¹ workshop took place over a weekend in October 2014 in a community-managed public space in the centre of Madrid. It was a self-initiated proposal by Estudio SPN and Eugenia Muscio in collaboration with Ciudad Escuela.²

Ciudad Escuela is a pioneer open-source urban pedagogy project founded by various Spanish collectives of architects and technology experts that turns citizens into teachers and students. It questions how and who makes cities today, and what types of learning are at stake. Ciudad Escuela's pedagogy aims to make visible the resources, learning and knowledge that multitudes of people and communities are already deploying towards the construction of a better city. The city is their campus. It uses workshops as a way of bringing people together to discuss and learn from each other. It is supported by the internet and the Open Badges³ technology of the Mozilla Foundation to design a series of pedagogical itineraries that discover and value other type of interventions in the cities creating networks and connections. Open Badges are online representations of skills gained by anyone through a variety of experiences. Each badge earned contains data about the skills and the issuing organisation. Badges can be displayed and shared online, helping people find out more about each other's knowledge and enabling sharing. The badges showcase the importance of unregulated learning in the internet age. There are 15 different Badges in the Ciudad Escuela platform which are considered 'learning units' on the skills, knowledge and tools that are important to build a better city. Guadua Activa⁴ emitted the 'Sustainability & Management' badge to participants.

Where?

El Campo de la Cebada⁵ / Cebada Square is a community-managed public space in the historic centre of Madrid. The site used to be a public sports hall which was demolished in 2009 with the idea of building a new one but the financial crisis stopped the project. The community was left with no sports facilities and a hoarded empty 5,500m² site sunken from the street level.

Since 2011, the local community in collaboration with collectives of architects have been managing the space as a place for social and cultural activities open to everyone. They have built street furniture, a stage and allotments and have organised film screenings, theatre plays, workshops and other events such as TED talks.⁶

There is a strong connection between Ciudad Escuela and Cebada Square, one could argue that the square is the main physical 'campus' of Ciudad Escuela.

What?

In the above context, we proposed Guadua Activa as a hands-on building workshop open to everyone to participate and to learn about construction with bamboo; aiming to create a scenario of collaborative work among all participants, and a space for reflection on new forms of urban design and the use of public space.

Through our connection with the community of the Cebada Square, we identified their need to provide greenhouses for the 'Urban Allotments' group which will also serve as seedbeds in winter. To achieve this we proposed to use bamboo cane as it is an appropriate and sustainable material for this use.

Aims

Estudio SPN⁷ is a research-led practice working between practice, research and academia. Our focus is



Campeo de la Cebada / Cebada Square, Madrid. Image by Zuloark

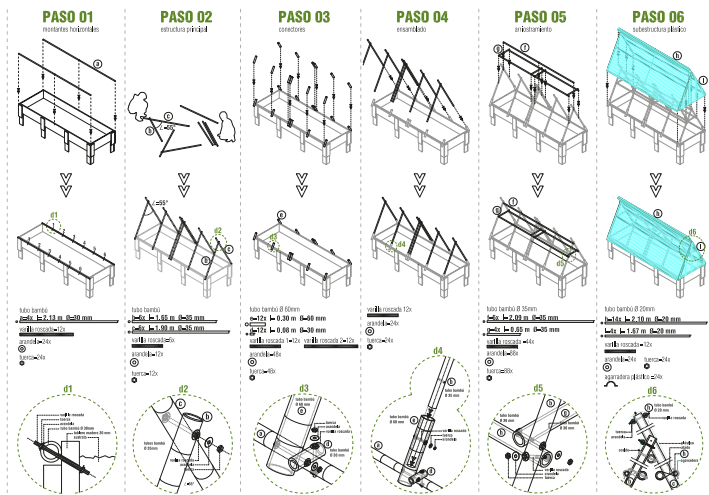


'Urban Orchard' in Cebada Square, Madrid. Image by Zuloark



Ciudad Escuela, open source urban pedagogy: online platform

GUADUA ACTIVA, WORKSHOP IN BAMBOO CONSTRUCTION, CEBADA SQUARE, Madrid.



Guadua Activa workshop information by Estudio SPN



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on the fields of architecture, urbanism, participatory design and research with special interest in projects of community support through the design of productive cycles and strategies. Central to those strategies was the use of bamboo as a material. We had previously implemented these ideas in projects, competitions and workshops typically in Colombia where bamboo is local.

This workshop was testing some of our research ideas adapted to the urban context of Madrid with a small scale intervention over a short period of time. It aimed to disseminate our knowledge on the use of bamboo whilst working with a community that could benefit from it.

Methodology

The workshop follows the principles of Experiential Learning (Dewey⁸; Kolb⁹; Schon,¹⁰), using methodologies of learning by doing and creating a space for reflection.

Due to the restricted amount of time, we developed a base design to be used as a starting point for discussion. The participants had different skills and backgrounds with a majority of architectural students but also some experienced architects and members of the community from other professions.

The group worked cohesively and we observed peer learning and 'reflection in action'. The group of 20 participants was mixed with 45% architecture students, 40% architects (some very experienced) and 15% a mix of other professions. Ages ranged from 19 to 55 with some children as additional helpers.

Funding was raised with registration fees (15€/person) to cover the cost of the materials.

Outcome

The workshop was successful for a number of reasons. The brief was very clear and focussed on the material and the practical aspects of construction but allowing room for the participants to refine the design. The group worked well together, learning through making showing high levels of critical reflection. The Urban Allotments team gained two new greenhouses and seedbeds for their urban garden. Participants got their 'sustainability and management' badge and they shared their newly acquired skills with their online badges. This helped spreading the word about the use

of bamboo, the public space and the urban allotment initiative.

The fact that the workshop used the public space generated interest in other people using the square, and facilitated discussions and debate about public space in cities and other opportunities to use bamboo.

Conclusion

This is a small scale project with a medium scale impact which is embedded and supported by a larger open source urban pedagogy project; Ciudad Escuela. It had a bigger impact in the Cebada square and the networks of community groups and urban and architectural activist groups that operate around it, as there was physical and human connection with the participants and the process.

We discovered the importance of 'non-academic' learning and the potential of establishing good networks, physical and virtual, to disseminate knowledge. These types of initiatives could be bridging the gap between universities and non-academic learning. They can become the tool that brings university and theory into practice, connecting with the user and contributing to the built environment. However for these interventions to have larger impact there needs to be more institutional and political support to all processes.

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